

Analysis: Experts warn US plans for aid to Somalia will pour money into unstable government



WASHINGTON (AP) — The Obama administration's recent move to increase aid to Somalia takes aim at Islamic extremists' safe havens, pouring resources into a government that analysts say may not be worth salvaging.

Resolving the Somalia dilemma demands that the U.S. walk a delicate line — politically and militarily.



Haunted by a disastrous 1993 U.S. military assault into the Somali capital, the administration is carefully working to lower the growing terrorist threat near the Horn of Africa without sending in American troops.

A U.S. military footprint, experts and military officials agree, would risk alienating allies and adding to charges by Islamic extremists of a Western takeover. It also would mean an additional military complication for U.S. armed forces already fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The administration's plan is to provide the faltering Somali government money with weapons and to help armies in several neighboring African nations train Somali forces. Many experts worry that the arms sent to Somalia may end up diverted to insurgent groups, and they question whether millions of dollars in aid will be well spent on a weakened government overwhelmed by violence and humanitarian needs.

Mogadishu's Transitional Federal Government "is not a government by any commonsense definition of the term," J. Peter Pham, an Africa expert and associated professor at James Madison University, told a congressional subcommittee this past week. "It has shown no functional capacity to govern much less provide even minimal services to the citizens."

For the U.S., even a shaky U.N.-backed government controlling only a few blocks in the capital may be the only option.

"You've got to look at the overall situation and say that the chaos that is there is our greatest enemy," said Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., chairman of the House Armed Services subcommittee on terrorism subcommittee.

"Job one would be trying to bring some semblance of order to Somalia, and if that is your objective, there is only one game in town — and that is the government that is there," he said.

Smith acknowledged the possibility that in the next six days or six weeks, that government could be gone, its leaders captured, dead or fleeing.

"Given the interest we have in that region, the presence of al-Shabab and al-Qaida, it is worth it to try and keep this government alive," Smith told The Associated Press. Al-Shabab is trying to topple Somalia's government and install a strict form of Islam. Hundreds of foreign fighters from countries including Pakistan, Yemen and Saudi Arabia are reinforcing the group's ranks.

The U.S. considers al-Shabab a terrorist group with links to al-Qaida, which al-Shabab denies. The group controls much of Somalia and its fighters operate openly in the capital.

Experts who have studied the barely governed region warn that attempts by other countries to try to anoint and impose any rule on Somalia will fail. Instead, they say, allies should work to bolster a bottom-up approach building on local nongovernmental organizations and successful surrounding governments in the semiautonomous regions of Puntland and Somaliland.

Ted Dagne, a specialist in African affairs who is with the Congressional Research Service, painted a grim picture of conditions in Somalia, telling Congress that many more will die there in coming weeks.

He said as many as 22,000 civilians have been killed and 1.1 million displaced in the past two years, largely in south-central Somalia. About 476,000 have fled to other countries, he said.

According to Dagne, roughly 400 foreign fighters have entered the country in recent months, including nearly 300 who flowed into Mogadishu during May. The fighters, he said, are working with local insurgents — largely al-Shabab — in their campaign to force the collapse of the transitional government.

Administration officials put the number of foreign fighters at less than 200. Counterterrorism officials estimate that dozens of al-Qaida-linked extremists have been moving from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region to safe havens in Somalia and Yemen, and that they have used the region to set up temporary, mobile training camps.

Dagne said Somalia needs more weapons and a well-organized security force to battle an elusive insurgency that moves in small independent groups.

Political leaders from Somalia's diverse regions say the only way to beat back the militants is to build up the failing government, provide economic development and create an army and police force that can bring stability to the fractured nation. To do that, they said, they need millions of dollars in aid.

During the 2009 budget year, according to the CRS, the U.S. provided about \$177 million in aid to Somalia. Officials say there are now plans to provide less than \$10 million to help build the security forces, including the delivery of about 40 tons of arms.